

Conrail Railyard TAG Group Fact Sheet

(Provided by Citizen's League for Environmental Action Now, Inc.)

It became apparent to a group of Elkhart County, Indiana, individuals in 1986 that our sole source aquifer of drinking water was becoming a target for all kinds of pollutants (VOC's, eColi, PCB's etc.), and the need to protect this prime requisite for human existence was necessary. The enactment of a Groundwater Protection Ordinance by Elkhart County became a reality in 1989 and those officials who first refused to acknowledge this need are now proud to take credit for it.

Seven individuals, including Michael Fitch, who is now the President and Chairman of the Board, formed CLEAN, Inc. (Citizens League for Environmental Action now), a non-profit organization, on December 9, 1988 to protect and monitor all related groundwater activities.

Thank God that Mike in 1986 went to the Elkhart County Health Board to have his water tested from a new well on C. R. 1. Now ECHD tested only for bacteria and still does to this day, but were smart enough to send him (at his expense) to a lab because the water "tasted funny." When the TCE count came back at 800 ppb and the carbon tet at 200 ppb, what would you have done if you were told not to drink the water??

The report to EPA brought Kenneth Theisen from the Region 5 office in Chicago whose research indicated a 675 acre tract one mile plus deep and four miles long (covering parts of two counties, Elkhart and St. Joseph) and bounded on two sides by the St. Joseph River and Baugo Creek, one side by Conrail Railroad and one side by a State Highway was polluted and designated the area as a Superfund Site and the Robert Young Railroad (Conrail) as the polluter and PRP. The site was put on the National Priorities List of 1000 polluted sites on August 30, 1990.

At least 505 homes were first thought to be affected and 76 homes were put on point-of-use or whole-house filtration systems and monitored by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management. During the following investigations more homes were found to have high levels of VOC's and also were placed on filtration systems.

The Superfund Site became CLEAN's focus and CLEAN applied for and got its first Technical Assistance Grant (TAG) on August 18, 1993. The bidding process enabled CLEAN to hire John Wallace, an Environmental Consultant, as its consultant, and to have contact with John Barnhardt, a local hydrogeologist. CLEAN was just recently successful in getting a third award which has allowed us to continue through the clean-up phase for this Site.

The TAG allowed CLEAN to publish a quarterly Newsletter to keep the homeowners abreast of the activities (this is now delivered to 1200 homes in the Site); to point out and pressure Conrail and later with American Premier Underwriters (formerly Penn Central Railroad) to protect other homeowners drinking water by filtration systems; to force Conrail to construct and pay for a "state of the art" water line from the City of Elkhart; and to pay each homeowner's cost of hook up and water bill for one year. Due to CLEAN's activities through the TAG, 96% (which according to EPA is excellent) have been hooked up to city water.

CLEAN held public meetings alone and with EPA and the Board opened up dialogue with Conrail, EPA, IDEM and Elkhart City Water Utilities people, along with the St. Joseph County Officials, and consultants and construction people at various intervals.

The TAG was used to assist Conrail's first consultants in collecting data and homesites address verification for water hook-ups.

A canvas was actually done by CLEAN and its consultant in an effort to furnish correct addresses, because the original specs as supplied by Conrail's contractor were incorrect.

CLEAN's phone was and still is available to all requests for help or assistance.

CLEAN provided sampling of wells and the cost thereof for individuals who were concerned about their drinking water, but were not scheduled for sampling by Conrail's contractors.

TAG money allowed CLEAN to research and furnish local information maps, and contacts with businesses and residents to EPA and IDEM.

The TAG helped CLEAN to pressure Conrail to an 8 million dollar settlement for bringing out the water line and to eventually furnish water to 1200 homes. The settlement for the clean up phase will be or surpass 25 million dollars.

Testing is showing more and more what the total impact of the pollution has on the area, and money is still being used to push for a clean up of the railyards. Testing now indicates high counts of TCE and carbon tet in the St. Joseph River, and vapors have been found in homes of residences. A benthic macroinvertebrate study of the St. Joseph River is a part of the Consent Decree and will soon begin.

A public repository of all information on the Site was established at Holben Elementary School and the Elkhart Public Library.